

The Red Army Fights for Its Life

By SERGEI ZAMASCIKOV

The newly elected Estonian Parliament enacted a resolution Thursday relieving young Estonians of their legal obligation to serve in the Soviet army. Latvia will likely follow next month. The Baltic Republics' challenge to Soviet military power suggests that there might after all be something in the suggestion made by various members of the Soviet government—including, it has been reported, President Mikhail Gorbachev himself—that the Red Army instigated the crackdown on Lithuania. While Western analysts have a natural proclivity—certainly justified by past experience—to discount stories about "hard-liners in the Kremlin," this time these claims might be true.

The Soviet military does have reasons to make a show of force in Lithuania. Although the armed forces initially supported President Mikhail Gorbachev's reform drive, the political, social and moral status of the military have been undermined by his policies. Minister of Defense Sergei Sokolov was unceremoniously retired, along with a number of senior commanders; the defense budget has been cut and troop strengths reduced; Eastern Europe has been lost; the standard of living of career servicemen, officers and NCOs has been permitted to deteriorate; and the leadership has failed to control the criticism of the military in the newly free press.

Military Restiveness

There have been signs of military restiveness in recent months. In a March interview in *Izvestia*, defense minister Gen. Dmitri Yazov echoed the criticisms of Soviet defense policy made by Chief of General Staff Gen. Mikhail Moiseev in an interview with the army's newspaper, *Red Star*, in February. Gen. Moiseev had expressed unprecedented criticism of the new party program and said that the cuts in the defense budget might reduce the Soviet Union's military potential. Military journals such as *Communist of the Armed Forces* and the *Military Historical Journal* have issued ominous warnings to those who are trying to "unilaterally disarm us against the aggressor."

The military simply may not be prepared to accept an Eastern European outcome in the Baltic states, not just because of the threat to Soviet security, but because of the threat to its own integrity as an institution. The publicity around the 500 deserters that the Soviets have rounded up in Lithuania has created a false impression that the Soviets are dealing with the problem of desertion for the first time. But even before the crisis in the Baltics, desertion had become a serious problem for the Soviet military. The military has complained for years about the declining quality of its recruits, particularly their lack of motivation and poor physical condition. Large numbers of Moslem draftees—who by the year 2,000 will provide more than 50% of the available pool of young men—speak virtually no Russian. Worse, they show extreme reluctance to serve.

Outright draft resistance, however, was virtually unknown in the Soviet Union before Mr. Gorbachev's time. Now it is spreading. Official figures list 6,647 young men who failed to register during last spring's "call up." A number of unofficial reports suggest that the real figure is at least twice as high. More than 1,200 Armenian and Azeri soldiers fled their units and joined their fellow nationals during the ethnic strife in Baku. According to the Chief Military Prosecutor, Gen. Aleksandr Katushev, more than 1,000 Balts are currently listed as deserters.

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gans to ensure compliance with the law and punish those who resist the draft. Increasingly, these organs are reluctant to take action against fellow nationals. Local political authorities have also lent support to draft resisters and deserters.

Military authorities complain that local governments in Lithuania have been refusing to establish draft boards and that youth are being encouraged to join the republic's new militia and border forces. A local Georgian party secretary reportedly responded to a military official's plea for help in his district with the following statement: "I am with the people. And the people don't want to serve." In Armenia, hatred of conscription led to an attempt on the life of the local draft commissioner.

The Russian republic itself is not immune to the problems of draft evasion and desertion. In some Moscow districts, fewer than 5% of draftees reported on the first day of the "call up" last fall. Although complete statistics are not available, the figures for large cities such as Leningrad and Moscow are apparently alarmingly large. The storming of the Vilnius Psychiatric Hospital in search of Lithuanian deserters on March 27 may have been a sign that further draft resistance and desertion will not be tolerated.

The military is also clearly unhappy about its new role in policing ethnic strife. In April 1989, airborne units were called on to suppress a massive demonstration in Tbilisi, Georgia. Since early 1989 the armed forces have been enforcing martial law in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The armed forces' strong show of force in Lithuania may be intended to relieve them of the necessity of suppressing similar rebellions elsewhere in the future. It may also be that the military feels so reluctant to police the population because it

is aware of its inability to continue doing so for very much longer.

The Soviet armed forces are composed of five separate services: the strategic rocket forces, the ground forces, the air defense troops, the air force and the navy, but only some part of the ground forces can be used against the population. Most ground forces divisions are of reduced strength. Without summoning the reserves, these divisions are not capable of doing much more than maintaining and guarding equipment. But a reserve "call up" would require the cooperation of local authorities—the same authorities who have already shown themselves to be at cross purposes with the military. The January "call up" of Russian reservists for duty in Armenia and Azerbaijan was canceled because of strong protests by mothers and wives, as well as reluctance to report among the reservists themselves.

The only forces reliably available to the Soviet government to support the local police and the anti-riot internal troop units are therefore the combat-ready regular strength army troops and the elite airborne, air assault and *spetsnaz* units. Altogether, that gives the government: 24 motorized rifle divisions and independent corps; 24 tank divisions; five airborne divisions; 10 air assault brigades; 20,000 *spetsnaz* troops; and 35,000 Ministry of the Interior troops.

Hardly Enough Troops

Although this "order of battle" may appear impressive, in fact, most of the infantry and tank units listed are deployed in Eastern Europe and in strategically important areas near the borders. This leaves the airborne, the air assault and *spetsnaz* troops—and these troops, though well trained and drafted mostly from the Slavic regions of the Soviet Union, are hardly enough to suppress simultaneous large-scale revolts.

Many of these troops are already deployed in the Transcaucasus region to control the Azeri-Armenian conflict. In Lithuania, the 7th Airborne division had to be utilized because the only ground forces division in Lithuania is not combat ready. While the Soviet military may be capable of dealing with isolated disturbances, putting out many dispersed fires would seriously tax its capabilities.

The tensions in Lithuania now seem to be subsiding. The Lithuanians have adopted a less defiant attitude, and the Soviets have dropped hints that they are open to negotiations. But once again the interests of the military may interfere. The 1990 spring call-up began on March 31. Many young Lithuanians can be expected not to have responded by the May deadline. The military may then once again be tempted to use force to reclaim what it considers its due: the military service of every eligible young man who lives in those territories it believes to be its own.

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